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ABSTRACT

A study examined the narrative structures present in one young girl's writing and the way those themes were incorporated into a group's oral story creation. Stories were collected during a summer reading and writing group as part of a qualitative study exploring narrative structures being used by preadolescent girls. Subjects were 14 girls from diverse racial background and ranging in age from 9-11. These girls learned to tell stories within their cultures, and their talk and writing reflected what they knew from their own social circumstances. Analysis indicated that several of the stories featured plots that depended on the main (female) character's lack of agency, and many of the stories had references to the importance of looks or appearance. Analysis also showed that, in one story selected as an example, the writer's religious background was omnipresent, and references in the story were misunderstood by listeners and instructor alike who did not share that same religious background. Findings suggest that this misunderstanding indicates the impact on voice that dominant secular narratives can have on an individual's narrative. (Contains 11 references; the fictional written story example and the group created oral story are appended.) (CR)

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Making Worlds from Words:
An Analysis of the Oral and Written Narratives of a Preadolescent Girl

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> My name is Callie Lipton I'm 11 years old I have two brothers (Otis and Martin) and one sister (Damaris). I have 2 kittens (kat, pat), 1 hamster (Bambi), 1 dog (Tom). and this is my story how I became pretty. (beginning of story written by Camille, aged 10)[1]

Our stories are central to the way we shape and understand our lives (Bruner, 1991; Bruner, 1994; Baur, 1994). From the narratives of our culture, we derive rules, "recipes" (Bruner, 1994; Greene, 1994) for how to act in our world and how to understand who we are within that world (Bruner, 1991; Gilbert, 1994) as well as to achieve what we desire (Walkerdine, 1990). These recipes structure our stories and, through our stories, our self-understanding. "[T]he ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with [narratives] become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself" (Bruner, 1994, p.36). This paper is an analysis of the narrative structures present in one girl's writing and an exploration of the way those themes were woven into the tapestry of a group's oral story creation.

These stories were collected during a summer reading and writing group that I facilitated and observed as part of a qualitative study exploring the narrative structures being used by preadolescent girls. Fourteen girls from diverse racial backgrounds and ranging in age from nine to eleven participated in this study. Like all of us, these girls learned to tell stories within their cultures (McCabe, 1992) and their talk and writing reflected what they knew from their own social circumstances (Steedman, 1987, p.61). This knowledge included the participants' experiences with and interpretations of race, ethnicity, class and gender. One of my goals in this study was to learn how these interpretations emerged within the stories the girls constructed (Gilbert, 1994; Steedman, 1987).

Several of the stories written by the girls in this study featured plots that depended on the main (female) character's lack of agency and many of the stories had references to the importance of looks or

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[1] All names except my own are pseudonyms. Additionally, unless it interferes with understanding, I have not standardized the children's spelling and grammar.

appearance. It is not surprising to find female passivity and a focus on appearance in girls' stories (Gilbert, 1994). Cultural stories promise great rewards to girls and women who act in ways that embody their culture's idea of gender (Walkerdine, 1990). And, "for contemporary Western women and girls..., femininity is linked with qualities like selflessness, heterosexuality, beauty, modesty, gentleness, and love - qualities of femininity which we learn to desire and seek" (Gilbert, 1994, p.132). However, it is simplistic and dismissive to assume that girls and women are passive recipients of their culture's prescriptions of femininity (Walkerdine, 1990). Each individual is active in creating her own "recipe" for achieving what she desires. Such an active creation was dramatically evident in the story that is the focus of this paper.

"This is My Story How I Became Pretty"

When she wrote this story, Camille was 10 years old and had just finished fourth grade in an urban public school. Camille is Latina, fluent in both Spanish and English and was often called upon to act as the translator for her parents who are fluent in Spanish but speak limited English. She is her parents' only child, although she has an older half-sister who does not live with her.

Camille's story initially appears to be very much focused on the importance of the main character's loss and regaining of beauty. As she writes in the beginning of the story, "this is my story how I became pretty." However, through the use of established methods for analyzing children's and adult's narratives (Bruner, 1991; Applebee. 1978; McAdams, 1993; McAdams, 1994), I realized the world of Camille's story was much more complex then I had originally understood. As I explored what the idea of

beauty meant in her story, I realized that what initially appeared to be objectified beauty was strongly connected with health.

> On a poor side of Bronx, New York City where a lot of desises were, especially cancer.
> I had a desise called scarlet fever. My tempature went to 104°F If I was 105 I died.

> I guess I was lucky. When the fever was gone It left me with wrinkles and spots. I had three operations some spots were gone. My pets were sad.

As the story continues, faith succeeds where modern science fails. Although the medical operations were ineffectual at removing the traces of the disease, an angel has the power both to cure Callie and, through her return to health, to bring happiness to those around her.

> One night an angel came to my room. And said "I am going to give you the gift of prettyness" She waved her pretty wand. In the morning I t[h]ought it was a dream but no It was real. I will always thank the skies. My family and pets were happy.

Camille footnotes this ending with two pictures. The first, labeled "ugly" is of a girl whose face is covered in wrinkles and spots. Next to it is a picture which looks like the same girl but who now is blemish-free and smiling radiantly. This picture is labeled "pretty".

In this story, health and beauty are connected to the healing power of religious faith. Although the main character might think the angel's words and gift are "a dream", in fact "it was real". Faith, in this story, offers the power of curing what medical science cannot. Additionally, because there was no description or drawing of Callie before her illness and because it is explicitly the story of how she *became* pretty, it seems that the angel's powers do not merely *restore* Callie's appearance to the way it was before her sickness but, rather, improve her appearance.

Religion in Camille's story offers the possibility of, after difficulties like illness and operations, becoming more attractive than she was initially. And this gift derived from faith seems to be more important to others than for oneself. All that occurs in Camille's story is done without "any thought for the self, any wanting, longing, desire or anger" (Walkerdine, 1990, p.95). Although we know the feelings of Callie's pets and those of her family, the only emotion Callie expresses is thankfulness.

As Walkerdine (1990) and Steedman (1987) have noted, it is not possible nor ultimately relevant to separate out the strands of gender, race and class from an individual's construction of self. Although the importance of beauty to this female character has strong connections to Western culture's emphasis on female attractiveness, it is also strongly linked to Camille's personal context in which the Catholic

church plays an important role. Similarly entwined is the contrast between the passive heroine and powerful angel, the story's two female characters.

This ten-year-old girl is actively involved in deriving from her knowledge and experiences rules for the way the world works through stories. Linking the fairy tale narratives available in the secular context of public school to the religious narratives of the Catholic church, the magic wand of a fairy becomes a metaphor for the power that angels represent in Camille's religion. Through the wave of this fairy tale element, the main character receives the female beauty so prized in Western culture.

"There Was This Rich Lady..."

I would like now to present a story that Camille created, along with three other girls, and to explore it in the context of Camille's themes. This story creation occurred one week after Camille wrote the story discussed above. I had read the girls a Norwegian fairy tale, "The Squire's Bride", in which the female protagonist goes against her father and refuses to marry the wealthy man who wants to marry her. I had chosen this story because I thought its plot would challenge some of the expectations the girls had for fairy tales. Whatever hopes I had for this story were dampened by the lack of response with which the group received it. I suggested that we tell our own version of the story. While all the girls in the group drew or painted, Camille along with Kindra, Harriet and Danielle created the story I present below. Kindra and Harriet are both European-American, aged respectively 10 and 9 and Danielle, 11 years old is, like Camille, Latina and bilingual in Spanish and English.

LS: So let's make our version of this fairy tale.

Camille: There was there was this um rich lady.

Harriet: She thought she owned everything could do everything.

LS: OK. So there was a rich lady...

Camille: There was this rich lady and she thought that everyone should be treated nice... She treated everyone for persons um like um

equal. And there was this other r'h man and he wanted to and he wanted to marry the rich lady and he was greedy and he was always greedy to people and people...

LS: OK, so, she was nice to everybody and then there was this...

Camille: There was a rich man and he didn't like many people and he treated people - he had slaves.
(See Appendix for complete transcript of this story)

Camille begins the story with a description of the characters who are described as almost opposites. There is a nice rich lady who treats everyone equally and a rich man with slaves who wants to marry her. All the qualities of the characters are internal ones (e.g. nice, greedy) an aspect that was present in the fairy tale I had read to them but was not a strong theme in the written stories of any of the girls. And, unlike both the fairy tale and their written stories, there is no mention of what the characters look like.

Kindra interrupts and her interruption is based on the direction she sees the story going. "I don't see why they would like to get married..." This challenge is based on her prediction that the two characters are going to get married. However, although the signs are strong that Camille is setting in motion a romance plot, it is not definite and that is why I ask, "Are they going to get married?"

Into this opening jumps Harriet. "Yeah... And the woman - it's exactly the same and after they married they figure out they're brother and sister." Although her earlier suggestion was ignored, this crack in the story's progression is wide enough and her idea of a sister marrying a brother resonates enough with the others to pass to her the storyteller's role that Camille has held to this point. The story changes from past to present and from description to dialogue as the girls enact what a bride and groom would say upon learning that they are brother and sister.

"Yeah," says Kindra. "They say 'ew I hate you'"

"Go away from me," someone adds

"Ew you're my sister I remember when," says Harriet, laughing.

"I hate you," Kindra says over Harriet.

"Get away from me - ow"

"No, no," Camille says, "they get married--"

"Ew," says Kindra embodying the sister/bride "I remember when he was picking his nose." Responding as the brother/groom she continues, "Well you kept farting in class."

In this interaction Camille appears to be trying to wrest the story back onto its original track but the surge of dialogue overrides her and finally she agrees to the brother/sister plot twist in a way that moves the plot forward. "They got married by the by the Church," she says. However, this idiomatic reference to being married under the auspices of the Catholic Church is misunderstood by Kindra who hears "by the church" as equivalent to "near the church" and says "No they got married near a toy store." Danielle adds on to this link and as the setting is debated or determined, Harriet takes this opportunity to flesh out the story of a bride who realizes after her wedding she has married her brother. Possibly, for Harriet this is the end of the story as she dwells on the details of the wedding and the aftermath of the siblings' recognition.

At this point, Camille takes the storyteller's role again to further the plot. Incorporating what she knows about marriage and how marriages end, she describes how that would work given her cultural context, "So then they didn't care that they got um married by the Church and so they got separated." This context is to some extent shared by Danielle, the only other girl of the four with a Latina background and, understanding what Camille means, Danielle uses her knowledge to challenge her. "You can't get separated when you're married by the Church. It take you a hard time to before." But Kindra and Harriet misunderstand Camille's meaning.

"They're married to a church?" Kindra asks and some of the other girls in the group laugh.

"No, no, no, no," says Danielle.

"Oh," says Kindra, "I thought they said, I thought you guys said that they were married [to

a church]

"It's instead of City Hall," Danielle explains.

"I was like, like what kind of crazy story is that?" says Kindra.

"That's what I thought too," agrees Harriet.

Invoking the antagonistic brother-sister relationship, Camille continues the story but the momentum seems to be gone. The exploration of marriage which had been the central link (Applebee, 1978) of the story has been examined on multiple levels and now the girls are left with the two possibilities they see for marriage. Either the marriage ends or the two have children. While the sibling relationship propels the story forward towards the former, the combination of incest and procreation seems to confuse the girls. While Kindra and Danielle return to their art, Camille and Harriet briefly debate what the children would look like before they too leave the story.

Conclusions

The richness of all the girls' written and oral stories defies being explored exhaustively. In addition, the context out of which these stories arose, the reading and writing group, and the girls' relations to each other and to me, has only been vaguely sketched. However, even given these constraints, it is possible to make the following conclusions and outline future possibilities for analysis and research.

The presence of religion in Camille's stories seems to be, though not overtly dominating, omnipresent. In her written story, this presence shapes the story and is central to its resolution. If, as Walkerdine (1990) discusses, in stories we learn ways to achieve our desires, one of the recipes that emerges from Camille's narrative is that faith holds the power to achieve a desired resolution.

In the oral story, religion's presence is less central but more explicit. As Camille uses what she knows about marriage to construct the story, her words are misunderstood by Kindra, a girl who does

not share Camille's cultural experience with the Catholic church. Understanding "married by the church" literally, Kindra interprets Camille's intention as scene setting rather than the pushing forward of the plot. Its potential to shape the plot as it did in her written story is lost through this misunderstanding.

Camille uses the same phrase later in context of the marriage being annulled, an addition to the story that moves it from the wedding that Harriet describes to the next twist. This time, her meaning is understood by one of the other girls. Danielle, who shares some of Camille's cultural knowledge, uses that knowledge to challenge Camille's addition. However, unlike Kindra's challenge in the beginning of the story which acted to deepen and lengthen the story, this challenge brings the group's focus onto Camille's cultural meaning. Where, throughout most of the story, the girls have understood each other's cultural references (e.g. fairy tale story grammar, sibling insults), in this case it is as if two languages are being spoken, one of which is incomprehensible to Kindra and Harriet. It is not clear from the interaction whether Camille understands their confusion. Possibly, for Camille, "married by the Church" is so transparent that it could have no other meaning. It is Danielle, who is older than Camille and whose father is not Latino, who translates the religious phrase into its secular equivalent, "It's instead of City Hall."

Kindra's misunderstanding of Camille's meaning mirrors my own difficulties in coming to understand Camille's stories. When I began working on Camille's story, I was irritated by her use of the word "angel" when, based on my own story grammar, I knew she meant fairy. It was only through exploring the meanings within Camille's stories, noting their parallels to South American stories and those I know from my Chilean brother-in-law, and corroborating my emerging understandings with the experiences of Catholic colleagues that I could finally enter the world Camille creates in such detail. Although I knew that Camille was Catholic, this knowledge had little meaning to me partly because it is not part of my own experience and partly because nothing in my ongoing review of literature on the lives and stories of Latina girls explores the importance of religion.

When she writes, a writer physically controls her words, as well as the shape and direction of her story. Such control, as Steedman (1987) points out, is generally not an aspect of children's oral language in conversation. In her writing, Camille used what she knew to create the story's world and, in this story at least, the form of that world was strongly influenced by her culture's religion. However, in the group story, the same kind of control was not possible and the result was that narratives and possibilities that Camille might not have considered were introduced into the story's world. Although I have not focused on it in this paper, it was striking to me that the story Camille began as a romance between a nice rich lady and a mean greedy rich man was transformed into an argument between a brother and sister wherein the sister has as strong a voice as the brother. Reflecting my bias for permeable narrative structures and heroines with agency, this opening up the romance plot for play seems a positive aspect of the group storytelling.

However, Kindra's misunderstanding indicates the impact on voice that dominant secular narratives can have on an individual's narrative. Although Camille helped to shape the group narrative, ultimately that shape was unaffected by the strongest theme in her written story. Religion is marginal to the oral story not because Camille did not introduce it but because it was not understood. I spotlight Kindra's response in closing not because hers was an inappropriate one for a ten-year-old involved in talking, drawing and group dynamics. Rather I use it to question whether similar misunderstandings are involved in the missing discourse of religion in psychological research on Latina lives.

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Appendix - I

Camille's fictional written story

Callie Lipton

My name is Callie Lipton I'm 11 years old I have two brothers (Otis and Martin) and one sister (Damaris). I have 2 kittens (kat, pat), 1 hamster (Bambi), 1 dog (Tom). and this is my story how I became pretty. On a poor side of Bronx, New York City where a lot of desises were, especially cancer. I had a desise called scarlet fever. My temp-/ature went to 104°F If I was 105 I died. I guess I was lucky. When the fever was gone It left me with wrinkles and spots. I had three operations some spots were gone. My pets were sad. One night an angel came to my room. And said "I am going to give you the gift of prettyness" She waved her pretty wand. In the morning I tought it was a dream but no It was real. I will always thank the skies. My family and pets were happy.

Appendix - II

Oral Story created by Camille, Kindra, Harriet and Danielle

[... indicates where dialogue has been left out]
?? indicates speaker is unknown

LS: So let's make our version of this fairy tale.

Camille: There was there was this um rich lady.

Harriet: She thought she owned everything could do everything.

Camille: There was this rich lady and she thought that everyone should be treated nice... She treated everyone for persons um like um equal. And there was this other rich man and he wanted to and he wanted to marry the rich lady and he was greedy and he was always greedy to people and people...

LS: OK, so, she was nice to everybody and then there was this...

Camille: There was a rich man and he didn't like many people and he treated people - he had slaves.

Kindra: I don't see why they would like to get married to

L: Are they going to get married?

Harriet: Yeah... And the woman - it's exactly the same and after they married they figure out they're brother and sister.

Kindra: Yeah. They say "ew I hate you"

? "Go away from me"

Harriet: "Ew you're my sister I remember when"

Kindra: "I hate you"

? "Get away from me - ow"

Camille: No, no they get married

Kindra: "Ew I remember when he was picking his nose" "Well you kept farting in class"

Camille: They got married by the by the church.

Kindra: No they got married near a toy store.

Danielle: They got married at a homeless shelter.

Harriet: And they said "now what is your real live name". "And what is your last - what is my new last name," she said and then the man said the same last name. "We're brother and sister" she said "I remember when you used to pick my-your nose and mark my face." And then and then the people are like walking out like "I don't want to be around this". But um something oh whatever the ugly house. And then they all walk out and then they just stand [inaudible] "I remember when you used to pick on me when I"... We can each draw an illustration of it.

LS: Of that story

Danielle: How bout we [inaudible] married to my horrible farting picking nose brother

(laughter)

LS: Is that the name of the story?

Harriet: [??] says are you now married, he says.

Camille: And then they had to make- um like the other and so then they didn't care that they got um married by the church and so they got separated...

Danielle: You can't get separated when you're married by the church. It take you a hard time to before

Kindra: They're married to a church?

(laughter)

Danielle: No, no, no, no

Kindra: Oh I thought they said, I thought you guys said that they were married

Danielle: It's instead of City Hall.

Kindra: I was like, like what kind of crazy story is that?

Danielle: No, no

Harriet: That's what I thought too

Camille: And they [inaudible] each other, they tried to kill each other....

Harriet: No when after they had children um...

Camille: They had children then the children would look like um...

Danielle: look like bad.

Camille: No, no they would look old if they were -

Harriet: They'd be so fat they'd be like this fat.